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# Above and Beyond

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**Although the bells of Van Leer Tower have been removed, the structure itself is still an imposing presence on the campus skyline.**

into a Bible college after their deaths. When Byrd Van Leer died in 1933, his wife finalized plans for the college, which was to include a chapel, school building and amphitheater, with the mansion serving as a president's house.

“Original plans were for the bell tower to become the entrance to a chapel, to be built behind it,” says Mary Winn. Construction for the 110-foot tower, designed in the Northern Italian Romanesque style, began in the fall of 1939. When the tower was finished, the 10 cast bells were shipped from New York and installed under the copper cupola at the top. The largest bell, weighing 2,000 pounds, was inscribed as a memorial from Margaret Van Leer to her late husband.

## Above and Beyond

**Though its original purpose is all but forgotten, the Van Leer Tower continues to make its presence felt on the north side of campus.**

North of Illinois Wesleyan's pasture-green athletic fields, a mysterious tower stands high above the trees and houses on Fell Avenue, just outside the campus boundary. The structure's peak, adorned with crosses made of blue lights, has been hovering over the campus for 67 years, but few students or alumni know its real history.

One who does know quite a lot is Mary (Hartwig) Winn '43, who was present when the Bird Colladay Van Leer Memorial Chime Tower was officially dedicated on Sept. 29, 1940. Her husband, James M. Winn '41 — who passed away in July of this year — was a senior at the time, majoring in organ and music education. “My husband Jim was the first to play the bells in that tower,” says Mary, who explains that the structure was commissioned by Margaret (Langstaff) Van Leer, an IWU graduate from the Class of 1881 and the widow of Bird Van Leer, who had owned a prosperous hardware store in downtown Bloomington.

In 1906, the Van Leers built a three-story mansion on five acres of land, dubbing the estate “Broadmore.” In the 1920s, the Van Leers — who were childless and devout Christians — announced their intention that Broadmore be converted

Mary Winn still has the printed program for the tower's opening ceremonies. Seating for 1,000 attendees was in place on the tower's lawn. A local youth choir sang and Illinois Wesleyan students dressed as angels opened the tower's doors for the first time. Jim Winn was selected by Margaret Van Leer herself to give the first public performance of the bells. He was chosen because of his experience playing chimes from Presser Hall's organ console.

Winn continued to perform on the bells twice daily, morning and evening, until he graduated from Illinois Wesleyan and entered military service. Mary Winn, who sometimes accompanied him, vividly remembers the tower. "Massive oak doors opened to a tiled room, from which metal, spiral stairs led to the second floor, where the console for the bells was installed.

"The player would stand, grabbing and pushing down on wooden rods shaped and installed somewhat like a keyboard," Mary recalls. "These rods pulled long cables, which moved the bell clappers high above. There were also wooden rods about 10 inches off the floor, making it possible to push these with one foot, ringing another bell. A music rack held a book of bell music, which had to be specifically written to stay within the narrow range of 10 tones."

After Jim graduated, Mrs. Van Leer continued to offer her friendship to the young couple, even arranging to have Mary driven to Rockford, Ill., to visit Jim, who was stationed there. Meanwhile, plans for a Bible college were stymied as World War II intervened and Mrs. Van Leer's health began to fail. In 1948, she established the Immanuel Bible Foundation as heir to the mansion and its grounds. She died the following year.



**A picture of Jim and Mary Winn taken in their college days. Mary sometimes accompanied Jim on his twice-daily rounds to ring the tower bells.**



**An interior light fixture reflects the tower's Northern Italian Romanesque design.**

The Broadmore estate shrank to its current size and served as the living quarters for the foundation's director and family. As the decades progressed, the tower's bells were sold or traded. The foundation itself quietly carried out its mission to preserve sacred music and promote Biblical training.

Immanuel's current executive director Marc Boon, has expanded the foundation's role in the community in recent years. Once open only to Christian groups, the mansion is now available for rent to anyone as a gathering place, and there are plans to open the bell tower for public viewing as early as next year. However, restoring the tower with real bells has been deemed too expensive, and the chime sounds are now electronically produced.

For Mary Winn, the absence of the bells is "disappointing," but she is glad the tower is still standing, bringing back memories of a special time in her life for her and Jim. "In spite of the war threat which loomed over us all," she says, "those were happy days."